

## YOU NEVER STEP IN THE SAME RIVER TWICE. QUIXOTIC FUTURES OF TACTICAL MEDIA

Interview with Brian Holmes by Arkadiusz Półtorak

Brian Holmes' work stretches across many disciplines and eludes easy labelling. Concerned with emerging forms of political action, art and media culture, he has authored numerous critical articles, essays and books (including *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society*), participated in multiple collective endeavors in research and activism, and worked in diverse institutional environments within and outside the academia in Europe and the United States (including The European Graduate School, documenta in Kassel or Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt). In the following interview – taken via e-mail in April and May 2018 – he discusses economic and ideological threats that jeopardize the future of politically engaged art and research.

**In a text published in the book *Politics of Study*, you said that in the time of furthering neoliberalization of the university “it is urgent to ally oneself with other projects and milieus, which can provide an outside space of commitment and experimentation while also interacting transversally with the university and exerting an influence on it”. Before we attend directly to how universities could benefit from such interactions (or what would it mean for them to become truly “welcoming” to external influence), let me ask you about two keywords that appear in your statement: “commitment” and “experimentation”. What do you mean while referring to these? Both categories seem to correspond with well-defined, engaged (or even “militant”) notions of research and knowledge.**

Around a decade ago I began asking myself a troubling question. If we live in “knowledge societies,” as I believe we do, then why does the critical knowledge produced in the arts and the humanities have so little effect on the social order? I don't think there is a single sweeping answer to that question, at least not in the form of a pronouncement on “the university.” Instead you'd better look at it on a case-by-case basis. If you examine a theoretical discipline like economics, for example, you'll see that there has been a tremendous amount of experimentation over the last half-century, springing from a close engagement between the academic theorists and active members of the financial sector. What's more, these neoliberal theorists and their banker colleagues also took up a veritable militancy in favor of the notion that all ri-

sks, even global ones like climate change, could be monetized and dealt with through private market transactions. In contrast to that, the arts and the humanities seem still today to be largely governed by the modernist notion of a purely self-reflexive process of development, where each particular practice doubles back on itself to produce new and ever-more exquisite levels of internal complexity. Here too the experimentation is very intense; but its effects are felt mainly by those who engage in it directly. Not much militancy there, or not so you'd notice it anyway. For that reason, the institutions involved – contemporary art museums, humanities departments – have tended to cut themselves off from the rest of the world, in a quite dangerous process of isolationism. This inward, self-reflexive turn not only leaves them extremely vulnerable to other, more interventionist forces, but also, it contributes very little to any broader process of social change. In short, there's a kind of paralysis affecting what could be the most vibrant democratic institutions. This is not an iron-clad rule, there are many exceptions, but still the overall effect seems to me quite troubling.

Now, at that time, around a decade back, I was quite deeply involved with a lot of media activists who were trying out the new possibilities that networked communications systems offered to social movements. We called that “tactical media,” it exploded around the year 2000, it was globally important up to the financial crash and arguably throughout the Occupy movement, and that whole experience remains fundamental for me. But even though I'm strongly inclined to various forms of social idealism – you know, I did my PhD thesis on Don Quixote, for some very good reasons – still I found the prevailing radical leftist theories of self-organization, commons-based peer production and so on to be a bit vague and naive in the face of the dramatic changes that were being wrought by accelerated global capitalism. Why not bring the aspirations of idealist desire, the experimentation of art and the sense of extreme urgency that permeates all political activism into the fields of complex technological and semiotic production that shape mainstream twenty-first century society? Groups like Critical Art Ensemble had convincingly shown that the “hidden abode” of social production was no longer the factory that Marx explored, but instead, the corporate or military laboratory. The point was to do radical critical interventions there, in the effective domains of technoscience, but without giving up the overwhelming desire for social justice that you get from a commitment to egalitarian social movements. Just as importantly, the point was to venture into this very antiseptic and often tightly guarded abode of technoscientific production without abandoning the wildly protean forms of subjective experimentation that have been developed over the course of a century and more by the artistic avant-gardes. Already in 2007, I tried to make that point in a programmatic theoretical text called *Extradisciplinary Investigations*, which was co-published by the French journal *Multitudes* and the European web platform *Transversal*. The whole thing – this unresolved triple relation between instrumental knowledge, social idealism and artistic experimentation – remains a live issue for me today.

**In Europe, your 2007 text could have been read in the context of new institutionalism that had given us, as a cultural formation, such institutions as BAK or Casco in Utrecht within the previous two decades. And yet, it was published just on the brink of the economic crisis and massive cuts on cultural funding that happened even in such generous states as the Netherlands. Ten years have already passed since then... What was acclaimed in the wake of social idealism and artistic experimentation only a decade ago, might seem like a “no alternative” mode of survival these days. How do you feel about the changing stakes of extra-disciplinary investigations in the extra-academic fields? Do these shifts call for new forms of commitment? Or maybe the Don-Quixotean persistence remains the highest value?**

In 2009 I decided to return to the US after living for twenty years in Paris. So it's difficult for me to evaluate what has happened with European institutions since then, or how people involved in them might read my texts – especially since I no longer want to take a jet plane across the ocean every other weekend, without any regard for the ongoing disaster of climate change. What I can say is that the cultural problem of the overdeveloped or “late capitalist” societies is not only budget cuts. It's also what you do with the money that is devoted to culture. As the wave of protest activity with which I had been involved in the early 2000s receded, I began to realize that its most highly symbolic aspects were receiving a kind of artificial life support from cultural institutions, mostly those associated with vanguard art. What's more, I also gradually came to understand that this quixotic persistence of the revolutionary gesture had been going on since the Sixties, or indeed, throughout the entire historical arc of the postwar liberal welfare states. Now, this is a delicate issue, because definitely one of the reasons you go to a museum is to look at a painting behind a protective pane of glass, or a beetle preserved in amber. In the social realm there is quite a value to the preservation and display of curtailed utopias, such as, for instance, the “hot summer” of the Italian 1970s whose history and living myth was so fascinating for me and my activist friends in the early 2000s. But here's the question: Do you really want to *become* a beetle preserved in amber, at a time when a bunch of raving neofascists supported by major industrial interests are clamoring to break the sheets of glass, smash the whole museum and go ahead with the current dead-end model of exploitative economic development that ultimately leads to world war and ecological breakdown? The challenge I see in the present is that of creating artistic, theoretical and institutional forms that can attract wide support and forge equally broad alliances, in order to deal with the new problems of ecology, technology and politics. I think this should go into effect, not only at the edges or on the margins of society where the harms are most acutely felt, but also at the mainstream center where the problems are actually produced. So to put it short, in cultural practice both the money and the highest value should be placed, not on the quixotic persistence of the modernist avant-gardes, but on the transformative evolution of social ideals.

**I presume that placing “both the money and the highest value” in this [transformative] evolution [of social ideals] would require the restitution of trust toward scientific institutions that Bruno Latour was advocating for in *An Inquiry into Modes of Living*. Or maybe the trust is still very much in place, yet too heavily invested in the neoliberal, market-driven notion of innovation... How could we possibly “reallocate” it? Once we start speaking of money and “the mainstream”, aren’t we departing from the realm of tactical action towards that of political strategy?**

Yes, you’re right on target, particularly on this issue of relocating or reallocating trust: but that needs some further discussion. The most valuable thing about the notion of the “tactical” was that it stressed where you really are, as an artist or theorist or media-maker involved with politics. You are not a counselor to some enlightened prince, nor an expert or a high functionary, you have no direct access to the legislative process nor to any binding form of decision-making. So no matter how theoretically perfect or aesthetically advanced your ideas or images may be, they are insignificant to any process of social change – unless you are able to give them form in social spaces where they might interact with potentially large numbers of people. Tactical media basically said get real about your politics, take it to the networks, take it to the streets. However, the tactical media practitioners tended to locate themselves along an anarcho-libertarian spectrum that focused on civil society as the antidote to an all-powerful state. I have come to see this spectrum as a characteristic of the neoliberal period: from 1968 onward the whole imaginary, on both left and right, was about dissolving what Foucault called the “cold monster.” Meanwhile, the really-existing state was reconfiguring itself to serve only one fraction of civil society – the emerging oligarchy – and its public-service aspects were being mercilessly stripped away. Wave after wave of self-organized protest has transformed the lives of millions of people and given them new powers of cooperation as well as access to extraordinarily detailed knowledge of the global political economy, so it’s not like media activism or what Guattari called the “molecular revolution” has achieved nothing at all. The tactical approach to the production and dissemination of knowledge has spread along with the Internet, and in the best cases it has given people much greater capacities to perceive and analyze the developments of the technological society. Yet at the same time, we have to admit it has done very little to shift the basic directions of the system. The situation is now dire: neoliberalism is dead, everything that was “liberal” in any sense of the word is on the way out, and authoritarian forces allied with some of the new oligarchs have a serious chance of maintaining power over the middle term in a number of important countries. What’s more, all this is occurring in a context where even a decade dominated by such regimes would be long enough to kill any chance of responding in time to climate change. The urgency has therefore shifted from the grassroots to the top. Getting real about your politics now requires identifying the avenues that lead to the strategic levels of state power – while remaining

aware that you personally will not reach that goal. So it's about exerting influence on mainstream electoral politics: by "voting the bastards out," for sure, but also by helping to develop useful public programs that can be built up and instituted in complex and intractably polarized societies. The advantage of a broken political consensus is that you can finally hope to advance something much better – while the other side proposes something fearfully worse.

Now, if it's not enough to just act horizontally and "trust your own people," as the tactical media practitioners might have said twenty years ago, then the big question of finding allies starts to rear its unnerving head. This is a question that refers to civil society, where ideals are formed and working methods are developed, before any political representation. Can professional groups with high levels of agency, such as scientists, really enter an opposition and press for a reformulation of the democratic state and of its responsibilities? Can they help create a new operational logic that is adoptable by corporations, in order to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases and dampen all the other dangerous trends of global ecological change? Can they be encouraged at the same time to relativize their traditional universalism, and recognize the interaction of different cosmovisions as part of Earth's evolution? That's what Bruno Latour is asking, with some direct inspiration from earth system science. What I find attractive in his approach is the prospect of reaching out to other sectors of society in hopes of establishing a more serious conversation than the one about computers, markets and disruptive innovations, which distracted the global middle classes from the accumulating disasters and thereby dissipated any chance for an eco-social regulation of capitalism during the neoliberal period. When I analyze my own position in society, and think about the possible roles I could play on those avenues leading to the strategic level, I find that one thing I can do is to help bring artists and intellectuals into alliance with climate scientists who have become *de facto* activists, and who are increasingly saying so publicly. The hope is that such an alliance could create new themes to help orient, not only private thinking and behavior, but also professional ethics and political action. However, it's clear to me that this emerging strategy of forming what's basically an anti-authoritarian or anti-fascist hegemonic bloc cannot be successful and cannot lead to a deep restructuring of capitalist society if it does not also take on all the forms of race, class and gender domination that have historically been associated with the figure of "Western man (*sic*) as master and possessor of nature." So it's definitely not about restoring trust in scientific institutions. It's about transforming the whole interaction between science, the state, the corporations and civil society, to get us out of a suicidal pattern. That's the real substance of this "conversation" I'm hoping for, which implies quite deep changes in subjectivities and in the forms of public exchange and collaboration, beyond the simple capacity to critique what you think is wrong. Now, it's obviously not sure that the strategy is going to work, and I'm well aware that my own role in it is vanishingly small. Still I do see an increasingly broad range of people in the US who are giving it a try, in the

face of the current power bloc that simultaneously assaults the environment and slaps down any attempt at the further development of civil rights. From dire times, positive change may yet come.

**In *Extradisciplinary Investigations* you call for support for projects that “tend to be collective, even if they also tend to flee the difficulties that collectivity involves, by operating as networks”. You belong to a few such networks, including the one associated with Berlin’s Transmediale. In spite of the festival’s openness to invite guests from “under the media studies radar” (such as Françoise Vergès, who appeared at the latest edition), its organizers are still criticized for sectarianism. How much flexibility and openness does a network like this require – in your opinion – to live up to the requirements of social commitment, or rather: not to fall prey to the pitfalls of the left’s isolationism?**

The European network that I am currently most involved with has its hub in the same building as Transmediale, but it’s a bit different: it’s the Anthropocene Curriculum that was launched in 2014 with the express aim of transforming the liberal university in order to deal with climate change. That’s a collaboration between the Haus der Kulturen der Welt and the Max-Planck Institute, so it’s an art-science initiative on a large scale. It’s intriguing to realize that the organizers at HKW see it as a way to bring the postcolonial critique that they supported in the late 2000s to the very center of technological society. It’s possible to do that, or at least, to realistically entertain that social ideal, because of the way that climate scientists became embroiled in a highly politicized conflict with major industrial lobbies. What’s more, this politicization of science occurred under the lengthening shadows of the Middle Eastern wars, the financial crash and the Syrian refugee crisis, which itself includes a climate-change component. So this is a perfect storm, and there’s no way for any thinking person to avoid the conclusion that many more storms are on the horizon. It’s in some respects comparable to what happened in the Thirties. However, the entire form of contemporary liberal societies developed in response to the Thirties and the World War, altering the baseline conditions very extensively, so you cannot just expect a repeat performance of that history.

You ask about the pitfalls of the left’s isolationism. It’s a real issue, but in our context, maybe the question could be more tightly framed. The isolation that I and my peers face as leftist cultural producers has to do with the peculiar operational logic of the liberal institutions forged under the conditions of the postwar Western welfare states. These institutions, which initially enjoyed tremendous state support, prolonged in some cases by private finance, have devoted themselves mainly to the self-reflexive speculative practices that I described earlier. Yet even this “inward turn” has had its consequences. The real effects of neoliberal cultural production are widespread: mirror architecture, postmodern spectacle culture, narcissist micro-media, targeted hyperconsumption, global tourist exoticism, etc. All these things are marked



by a refusal to deal with the social and ecological consequences of overly abundant and overly concentrated wealth. So in this sense, the aesthetic professions have exported their isolation, quite massively. Within that overall pattern, the properly leftist component of cultural production appears as a rather unspectacular detail: an increasingly precarious self-referential system that only occasionally manages to break out of its aesthetic and intellectual absorption to connect with larger matters of concern. The political left (parties, unions, etc.) has other problems, but this self-referentialism is the situation that cultural producers like ourselves have to deal with first.

I start from the same trap that Adam Curtis describes so well in his recent films, I feel pretty deeply stuck in most of those quagmires and I'm not trying to be holier-than-thou. What I am trying to do is to develop some protocols that can connect the idealism, the critique and the provocative aesthetic intensity of cultural production to other social and professional milieus, so we can work together to actually face the unwanted but very real consequences of our mode of social and economic development. The electronic art, media activism and immanent critique of the network society, on which something like Transmediale was founded, was the first context in which I elaborated these ideas. In that context I was attracted to the Italian autonomist thinkers gathered around Toni Negri because they said: "Let's work with the conditions of the present, with the techno-economic forms and varieties of individual consciousness that exist today." To me, that was an invitation to something like extradisciplinary investigations. However, the autonomists used the communist terms of the Thirties to deal with the conditions of the capitalist present – but only as those conditions had appeared in the anarchist Sixties! Alas, the cultural hall of mirrors goes on forever. It's so easy to tilt at yesterday's windmills. When I returned to the US in 2009 – going back to the place where fiscal austerity is permanent and radical culture is continually in "no alternative" survival mode – part of what I wanted to do was to change my own course, to invent a new way of operating.

**On the website of your eco-activist project *Living Rivers* – [ecotopia.today/livingrivers/map.html](http://ecotopia.today/livingrivers/map.html) – it is claimed that politically engaged action should aim at challenging "atrophied imaginations" of contemporary capitalism. This – I would posit – is already achieved through your versatile use of language. One of the maps available on the *Living Rivers* website is entitled "wars". It presents a web of farms and factories that are particularly damaging for the biotope of the Mississippi watershed. Could you comment on the choice of militarist terminology in this context? What kind of a theoretical statement is inscribed in this phrasing?**

*Living Rivers* was quite strongly influenced by Ursula Biemann and the whole group of artists involved in the *World of Matter* exhibitions, including the impressive on-line component, [worldofmatter.net](http://worldofmatter.net). If you look on that website you'll see that one of the contributors, Paulo Tavares, devotes a long and fascinating video to the recent

history of indigenous peoples' movements in Ecuador, culminating in the declaration of the constitutional rights of Mother Earth, or better, Pachamama. Tavares relates this social and ecological history to the political philosophy of Michel Serres in his 1990 book *The Natural Contract*, which begins with the observation that the Cold War between the NATO powers and the Soviet bloc masked another, equally violent and more enduring war between industrial civilization and nature. Serres thought that just as democratic society needed a social contract to bring an end to the war between the classes, so all of human society needs a "natural contract" that could bring an end to the attack on nature, or the disruption of what earth system scientists call "the biogeochemical cycles," of which we're a part, by the way. There is a lot to be learned from this triangulation between earth science, political philosophy and the struggles of indigenous peoples.

In the map, I tried to show some of the major components of the unacknowledged war on nature as it rages today in the Mississippi Basin. But it doesn't stop there, of course. *Living Rivers* was made as part of a group exhibition on the global phenomenon of industrialized GMO grain production. That show is called *The Earth Will Not Abide*. It features Ryan Griffis, Sarah Ross, Claire Pentecost, Sarah Lewison and my direct collaborator Alejandro Meitin, of the Argentinean group Ala Plástica. The two of us carried out a bilingual double map or "inter-basin collaboration" focused on the two great grain-producing watersheds of the Americas. If you go to *Living Rivers* and click the button that says "South" you can see his section, entitled *Ríos Vivos* and devoted to the Paraguay-Paraná watershed that flows through Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay and Brazil. There you will find an even more violent depiction of the war on nature, with its inevitable rebound effects on human beings, especially the poorest and most marginalized. I intend to translate *Ríos Vivos* for an upcoming installation of our show at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon. The view from Latin America offers a powerful illustration of the integral connections between the technological exploitation of planetary resources and the racialized and gendered relations of domination that took shape centuries ago, during the period of colonization. Those are mainstream issues today: on the streets, in the media, in the courts and in the halls of power.

**Beside building digital archives of activist and artistic actions, you also use academic symposia or events held at such institutions as Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt as platforms where such "extradisciplinary investigations" might be disseminated. Does the increased visibility of localized activism within these broad institutional networks contribute to changes in policy making? How would you estimate their influence?**

It takes quite a while for cultural practices to have any influence, and I don't think you can ever really assess how much, because such influence is gained through a very intimate interaction that has so far escaped measurement. However, right now we're



in the midst of a giant backlash against both civil rights and environmentalism, which are the clear targets of the Trump administration. In its turn, that backlash is mobilizing many people to go further with both environmental and civil-rights struggles, and to seek some kind of avenue leading to the strategic level. In such a context people are practically forced to ask questions about their own ideals and desires. What are they good for, where have they led in the past, what directions should be taken today? I see very concrete effects of this in my life as a cultural producer. For instance, in Portland we won't just restage *The Earth Will Not Abide* as a finished product. Instead there will be new work by the indigenous artist Sara Siestroom, who has offered to help us reach out to native communities; and additionally, I will carry out probably the most collaborative thing I've ever attempted, which is a bioregional map called *Learning from Cascadia*. I've conceived this as "an experiment in collective perception," and with the support of curator Mack McFarland and his team we're soliciting input from dozens of sources, ranging from individual artists, academics and scientists to ecological restoration initiatives, tribes, activist NGOs and public administrations. Similarly, the Anthropocene Curriculum project has not just remained in Berlin. Instead, working groups have formed around the world, including Deep Time Chicago of which I am a co-founder (<http://deeptimechicago.org>). Deep Time's proposal is to focus on the political ecology of our own environment, and to take the metropolitan area itself as the "golden spike" that reveals all the major characteristics of the current geohistorical era. This already involves lots of intertwining collaborations; but the whole thing is getting set to go much further. This year, in an international context shocked by the bellicose Trump administration, the HKW team has hooked into an official outreach program called "The Year of Germany in America" and they are using that diplomatic funding to organize a 2019 traveling symposium about the Mississippi as "Anthropocene River." This too is an experiment in collective perception, which will federate a number of university departments as well as artists' groups. Deep Time Chicago will obviously be a part of it, with artistic research into the heavily restructured riverine environments of southern Illinois and northern Kentucky. If things go well, this traveling symposium will be an important chance for people from many different disciplines to come into contact, not only with each other, but with the real material conditions and struggling organic life of a great watershed stretching from the Canadian borderlands to the Gulf of Mexico. A political ecology project like that, focusing on the most urgent issues of the present, cannot help but become an "extradisciplinary investigation" on a very large scale.

To conclude, I think you have to change with the times, and against them. None of the things that I have talked about in this interview are my private invention. Rather they are meanders in a very broad and complex flow whereby the progressive democratic-socialist projects of the twentieth century are trying to face their adversaries and to overcome their own limits and internal contradictions. These are daunting times, for sure. But it's encouraging to become part of the flow, and to learn to swim both with and against the current. The effects cannot be entirely predicted, particu-

larly the unwanted ones (more isolationism? more backlash? simple insignificance?) but it's clear that fresh things must be tried, with a greater sense of responsibility than before. The near future will certainly prove the old philosophical adage: you never step in the same river twice. After twenty years in Europe I guess I'm on a new deep dive into the Americas.